

## **READING IS LEARNT BY READING**

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Billions of people across the world learn to read using a diverse array of practices – from the “phonetic” to the “whole sentence” approach. Many children’s first exposure to the English language is through “nonsensical” rhymes like “Ba-Ba Black Sheep” or “Ring a ring a roses” – poems which make little sense to their contexts and whose roots are often macabre. Are there other ways more conducive to get children to read?

Many children experience difficulty with formal reading instruction based on exercises, material and drills that are to a large extent nonsensical. The philosophy of this kind of instruction, called “programmatically”, is that reading is a set of skills which can be taught and mastered in a pre-determined sequence, provided there are frequent tests. Programmatic instruction is the antithesis of meaningful language experience for teachers and children. It is primarily a method of control.

Frank Smith in his famous book “Reading” throws light on the process of reading itself. He proposes the idea of “the literacy club” which children need to join if they are to become successful readers. At the heart of Frank Smith’s analysis is the seemingly simple truth that it is only through reading that children learn to read. He describes the ease with which children become literate when they are personally involved with people actually making use of the signs, labels, lists, newspapers, magazines and books in the world around them.

### **Making Sense**

John Holt the famous American educationist recalls a very interesting case. The school was meant for Black African children and was situated in a low-income area. The children were not interested in the standard state text books. And if the books and their contents did not interest the children there was no way the teacher could coerce them into reading. Many teachers tried the usual ways and failed, until a young lady teacher changed it all. She was a fresher, just finished her teacher training course and was looking for new innovative ideas to foster reading. It did not take her long to realize that her students were not interested in the dry state sponsored text books. Her class was largely composed of poor Black African students. Most of them had never read or possessed a book; but their lives were full of music. What she did was simple. She wrote the popular numbers and songs the children sang in big letters on chart sheets and hung them on the classroom wall. As the children already knew the songs by-heart they were soon reading them. For once the written word made “sense” to them – the scribbling on the charts described their lives, their pains, their aspirations. This interested the children immensely. This was their “take-off” point in reading.

### **Context and Relevance**

This brings us to the whole question of context and relevance. Often the curriculum is so far removed from the lives of the learner that he/she fails to make any sense of it. The

plethora of “adult-education” material in India is ample testimony to it. It is often totally divorced from the life of the learner and the “exploitative” context of his / her life. No wonder adult education classes never elicited any popular response and died their own death. The whole vocabulary itself is “loaded” against the un-schooled poor. For instance the first alphabet in Hindi “Ka” for “Karz” (indebtedness) would be more appropriate for the dispossessed than “Ka” for “Kabootar” (pigeon). Similar “Sa” for “Sood” (interest on borrowing) would be more appropriate for the oppressed than “Sa” for “Saraswati”.

Sylvia Ashton Warner in her famous book “Spinster” writes, “What a dangerous activity reading is; teaching is. All this plastering on of foreign stuff! Why plaster on at all when there’s so much inside already? So much locked in? If only I could get it out and use it as working material. And not draw on it either. If I had a light enough touch it would just come out under its own volcanic power.”

Sylvia was teaching Maori children in New Zealand to read. She stuck “labels” on all familiar objects in the classroom. Small cards with “fan” “table” “bench” “blackboard” “door” written on them were stuck at appropriate places. Children would see them often, read them and soon become friends with them. Sylvia encouraged children to recount their stories, tell their experiences which she wrote down in the children’s own words. And because they were the children’s own stories they loved reading them and drew pictures to illustrate them. In one semester this poor village school in New Zealand produced over 60 illustrated stories, each a record of their experiences, in short a tapestry of their own lives.

Following a similar method Paulo Freire began by talking with Brazilian peasants about the conditions and problems of their lives, and showed them how to read and write those words which were most important for them. He found that it took only about 30 hours before the wretchedly poor and demoralised peasants were able to explore reading on their own. In the process they also traced the roots of their exploitation.

### **Not the word but the world!**

Gijubhai Badheka was a contemporary of Gandhiji. For 24 years he ran the most creative school for children in Bhavnagar, Gujarat. Everyday he told children a story – which captivated them and whetted their appetite for more. In the afternoons the children would enact out those stories. Soon they became so adept with words that there was no need to mug-up the dialogues by “rote”. If they forgot a few lines, they could “invent” them on the spot. Gijubhai felt it was totally illogical and foolish for every child to have the same state sponsored textbook. He said, “What could be more foolish than all the 50 children having the same book.” So, when the new session began Gijubhai urged the children not to buy “textbooks” but instead give him the money for buying story books. So, in the 1920’s Gijubhai swept aside textbooks and bought 3 different story books for every child. With this large collection of illustrated storybooks he started a classroom library. This was a library with the children’s own money – not gifted by Unicef, Pratham or the World Bank. Instead of three textbooks children could now read over a hundred colorfully illustrated storybooks. Gijubhai’s progressive vision of education “not the word but the world” has been replicated by few schools since independence.

